Student's Motivation In Studying English Language In The Context Of Distance Learning

By

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Abstract

The article is devoted to an important issue of maintaining students' interest at English language on-line lessons. The problem has become especially acute during the pandemic of COVID-19 when all the lessons at universities were moved to different educational platforms that was challenging for both students and teachers. One of the biggest problems was to keep students as interested in the subject as they were during their offline lessons. To study the issue the authors had a close look at the situation with distance learning at the Kazan Federal University and especially Institute of International Relations that prepares linguists with a major in translation. In order to obtain information about the changes in students' motivation the authors asked students and teachers to assess the students' motivation with the start of pandemic. Results were analyzed and presented in the article. They show that students' motivation definitely has changed. In addition there was a slight difference in the perception of modern educational technologies by teachers and students.

Keywords: Distance learning, online learning, motivation, language teaching.

Introduction

2020 academic year was unique for most educational institutions. It was the first time in human history when most of the lessons in bigger part of the world were moved to different learning platforms due to COVID-19 restrictions. Only now, one year since the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, we can start to analyze the ways it has changed us all and the learning process in particular.

Long before the pandemic, in 2011 Robert J. Blake has already mentioned that the role of the so-called OLL classes (online language learning classes) was getting more and more important [1]. By OLL he meant three kinds of classes: web-facilitated, hybrid and fully-virtual. He was quite optimistic about the future of OLL and thought that its implementation can result "in successful second language development when properly integrated into curriculum" [1, p. 19]. The uniqueness of the situation in 2020 was in the fact that no institution was 100% prepared for fully online classes and they didn't have other options. So they all had to cope with the difficulties caused by this quick transition to OLL classes.

In 2021 there started to appear the first results of researches of the implementation of OLL in different countries. For example, Andrea Appolloni with his colleagues studied distance learning in Italy, country that suffered greatly during the first wave of pandemic [2]. Their

conclusion was that Italian educational institutions were able to react to the challenges of pandemic successfully and in the result they may become stronger universities able to combine quality in education with potential of technological devices.

Juan Rivera Mata analysed online teaching in the USA and created recommendations on how to assess online exams during OLL classes [3]. His conclusion was that teaching online brings new challenges and opportunities at the same time. From his point of view students do not tend to cheat more during the online exams in comparison with the traditional ones. From the author's point of view, the main task of any teacher during online lessons is to explain students that learning is more important than grades.

Some scientists completed their comparative researches, in which they were comparing the results of the implementation of 100% OLL classes at the universities in different countries. For example, A. Patricia Aguilera-Hermida with her co-authors compared students' use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19 in the USA, Mexico, Peru, and Turkey [4]. Their conclusion was that the students' attitude to online learning differs in these countries. The technological infrastructure and socioeconomic context of each country played an important role in implementation of fully online classes.

Our research will continue this line of similar projects and contribute to the issue of implementation of OLL at universalities during the pandemic. It will focus on the students majoring in linguistics at the Kazan Federal University that is situated in Russia.

Methodology

The main purpose of this research is to study the experience of the Kazan Federal University in implementation of Microsoft teams as a facilitator of language learning and the changes of students' motivation, caused by shift to OLL classes. The objectives of this study are:

to study the peculiarities of the use of Microsoft teams for language teaching;
to investigate students and teachers attitude to Microsoft teams, benefits and disadvantages of this tool from their point of view;
to study the changes in students' motivation caused by implementation of OLL classes.

To complete this study the authors used the following methods: theoretical analysis of literature on this topic, interviewing teachers and students of the Kazan Federal University and the subsequent analysis of the results of these interviews, analysis and synthesis of the obtained data.

To complete this study the authors talked to the students and teachers of the Higher school of foreign languages and translation of the Kazan Federal University and made a qualitative research. In total 20 teachers and 50 students were interviewed to gather information about their attitude and motivation to the use of modern technologies in foreign language classroom.

Questions that were asked included:

what are the benefits of the use of Microsoft teams for foreign language classes (for students and teachers)
what are the disadvantages of the use of Microsoft teams for foreign language classes (for students and teachers)

how students' motivation has changed since the implementation of Microsoft teams (for students and teachers)

any personal impression of the use of Microsoft teams for language teaching.

The results are presented below in the Results section.

Results

Overall information

In 2020 when the whole world faced such a disaster as COVID-19 pandemic educational institutions were the first to move their work into virtual space and cope with challenges of distance communication. Kazan Federal University was no exception. It moved its classes to virtual space on the 19 of March 2020 till the end of the semester on the 30 of May 2020. Examination session was also held online in June 2020. Even now, when the article is being written, some students have to study online because they cannot come to Russia due to closed state borders.

At the beginning the biggest problem for the University was to choose a proper tool to offer teaching staff and students. The University decided to choose Microsoft teams, previously mostly unknown to the academic community in Kazan. Microsoft teams is a communication platform created by Microsoft in 2017. It is "a collaboration application that brings conversations, meetings, files and apps together in a single Learning Management System" [5]. It allows to:

- organise online group meetings;
- distribute assignments and then grade them;
- create teams for particular groups of students;
- use chat instead of e-mail;
- share files and work with these files simultaneously.

At the beginning of lockdown all the information about how to work with this platform as well as a video guide were published on the official website of the Kazan Federal University. But even having this amount of information, students and teacher had to spend approximately one week to adjust to this new tool.

When the process of transition was finished we were able to enjoy the use of this new technology in our foreign language classes. What was really appreciated by teachers of languages is that it is possible to organise Teams meetings that gives an opportunity to connect face to face in safe environment and resembles our usual offline classes. Usual teacher-students interaction that is so vital for language classes is possible in Microsoft Teams.

Other useful features were the use of the assignment area, power point demonstrations, and whiteboard interaction. In comparison to other online tools Microsoft teams is very helpful when you are going to have long meetings with students without interruptions. That was vital for the language classes in our university because our lessons last for 1,5 hours.

Perception of students

Students studying at the University are very young 17-22 years old. They are open to new technologies and they have lived with them from their early ages. That's why they are open for implementation of new educational technologies.

When students were asked what way of studying they prefer – to do only online tasks without face to face communication with a teacher or a combination of online tasks and a possibility to have online meetings with teachers, they all confirmed that they would prefer to have online meetings with teachers at least two times a week. It can be explained by the fact that their major is linguistics and obviously it is impossible to master a language without live interaction between students and teachers.

Among disadvantages of the use of Microsoft teams 12 of them mentioned heavy dependence on computer (laptop/ mobile phone / tablet) and Internet access. That was a problem especially for students living in remote, rural areas where Internet access is very limited.

5 students who took part in the interview confessed that online learning stimulated them to cheat during exams. From their point of view that may cause problems with their studying in future.

The attitude of Russian students including the students of Kazan Federal University to the possibilities of gradual movement to online learning was studied long before the pandemic. In 2005 there was a mass scale research on the students' attitude to distance learning [6]. The result of this research showed that Russian students do not trust online learning. 330 students from three universities mainly with majors in IT from three biggest universities: Moscow State University, Bauman Moscow State Technical University and Kazan Federal University were asked:

- Have you ever had experience of studying online? 26 % said yes. Two thirds of these 26 % were satisfied with the results of their online study.

- Do you support the idea of 100% online learning? Only 5% said yes.

New large-scale data on the students' attitude to online learning will appear very soon because now there are several research groups working in this area. Moreover many universities are doing different researches to find out the consequences of online learning and the possibilities of its future implementation. Some newly published surveys, for example the one completed by RBK media group, showed that 65% of students noticed that online learning is less effective than traditional one [7].

One of the main disadvantages that was named by students was weakening of motivation and loss of interest to the lessons. Their motivation suffered due to different reasons such as: distraction (most students returned to their hometowns and studied from home. So the main distracters were - parents, siblings, pets, etc.), inability of teachers to control all students as during an offline lesson (many students preferred not to turn on their cameras during the lessons and to switch off their microphones from time to time), less interesting lessons in comparison to ordinary lessons. All this factors led to the decrease of motivation.

Perception of teachers

Teachers were among the first to experience working online during the pandemic. In Kazan Federal University they were given one week to adapt to the new labour conditions and to start their lessons online. To assess their experience and attitude to distance learning we talked to 20 teachers of foreign languages (English, French and Spanish) at the Kazan Federal University. In general 16 teachers mentioned that their attitude to distance learning was quite positive, but they

underline that it can be used only in emergency situations or as an additional tool to traditional face to face lessons. 4 teachers confessed that they don't like OLL classes because they have to spend more time preparing for these lessons and because they feel nervous before and during these lessons.

To study the opinion of the bigger number of teachers we studied the results of Forbes business magazine whose journalists talked to university teachers in summer 2020 and asked them about their attitude to distance learning [8]. Among 1300 teachers who took part in the research 58% mentioned that they began to spend more time to prepare for the online lessons and 40% complained that their working place wasn't equipped well.

When teachers were asked to assess the change of their students' motivation 33% of teachers said that they had noticed decrease of students' motivation. 36% of teachers noticed that for students it was difficult to cope with the home tasks that became bigger. 30% noticed students' poorer concentration during OLL classes.

40% of foreign language teachers of the Kazan Federal University also noticed the change of motivation among students. When they were asked about the reasons they suggested that the main reasons were: technical imperfections that led to unclear image and sound, students' environment that prevented them from 100% concentration during the lesson and low self-awareness of the aims of education process. When our teachers were asked about the examination session in June most of them replied that it was more difficult for them to assess students because more students tried to cheat comparing to traditional examination. Moreover 20% of teachers said that their students passed their examinations worse than the teachers had expected.

This data shows that students' motivation was definitely influenced by the shift to online learning. Foreign language teachers had a double task – to adapt to new teaching tools and to make an effort to maintain their students' motivation on its usual level [9, 10].

Conclusions

As it was discussed earlier pandemic of COVID-19 and lockdown following it changed many spheres of our life. One of the first areas that was moved to the virtual space was education. Teachers and students were the first to start working and studying fully online. Russian universities as well as universities of other countries were not prepared for fully online classes. The amount of online courses that had existed before the pandemic was not enough to cover all the needs of the students. That was the reason why all Russian universities began to search for the most suitable educational tools for online learning. Kazan Federal University decided to choose Microsoft Teams because it has a lot of advantages: group meetings, useful assessment tools, group chats, unlimited lessons, etc.

Students and teachers of the Kazan Federal University mostly liked to work in Microsoft Teams. It is not very difficult to use it and it provides virtual communication between teachers and students in safe environment. [11]

Among disadvantages of this platform teachers and students mentioned: heavy reliance on computer and technical problems. In addition both groups noticed that they began to spend more time preparing for the lessons.

Students' motivation also suffered during fully OLL classes. It was mentioned by both groups: students and teachers. Motivation suffered because of different reasons: distraction, technical problems, absence of teacher's control, less interesting lessons, etc.

Students' motivation is the most important element in teacher-student communication. Its stability is the most important task of a teacher, especially during OLL classes. There is no universal way how to keep it on the same level. But every teacher needs to pay attention to students' motivation and try to preserve it as high as possible.

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